

## Scent Branding Sweeps the Fragrance Industry

From Abercrombie & Fitch to Fiat, companies are using "ambient scenting" in an effort to leave indelible impressions with their customers

On a recent April afternoon, a limousine carrying two French perfumers from multibillion-dollar, Manhattan-based International Flavors & Fragrances idled in front of a squat, clay-colored building in the South Bronx. The perfumers, Bruno Jovanovic and Pascal Gaurin, had with them a bottle of their newest concoction, L'Eau Verte du Bronx du Sud (translation: the Green Water of the South Bronx) to show Majora Carter, a leading green consultant and neighborhood resident. The perfume wasn't meant for Carter. Its intended recipient was a nearby low-income housing development—the Sister Thomas Apartments. By pumping this specially engineered scent into the building's hallways and common areas, the unlikely threesome believes the 200 residents will be infused with optimism and happiness. "The part of your brain that senses scent can allow you to feel really bad about what you see in front of you—or really good—depending on what it is," she explains. "The question is: How do you evoke a certain feeling without imposing on people in any way?"

The fragrance industry thinks it has the answer. Jovanovic and Gaurin, who are responsible for luxury colognes and perfumes such as Tom Ford Black Violet and Giorgio Armani Onde Extase, are leading the latest fragrance business craze, a form of sensory branding known as "ambient scenting." Jovanovic, 34, helped pioneer the trend by creating the "woody" aroma—a combination of orange, fir resin, and Brazilian rosewood, among others—for Abercrombie & Fitch. Since its roll-out in stores across the country two years ago, Abercrombie's Fierce, which also pervades sidewalks outside the clothier's stores, has become an integral part of the shopping experience. Popular demand compelled the company to produce the trademark odeur in bottle form, and, according to Jovanovic, customers have complained when store-bought T-shirts lose the smell after multiple washes.

Scenting an entire building is the latest ambition in a growing business that has, for years, gone unnoticed by most consumers. Roger Bensinger, executive vice-president for scent marketing company Prolitec, estimates there are now 20 companies worldwide specializing in ambient scent-marketing and dispersion technology. While many of these companies are privately held, industry executives value the business at roughly between \$80 million and \$100 million. These enterprises typically pair with fragrance companies and share in the scenting and machine maintenance dues, which can range anywhere from \$100 to \$10,000 a month depending on the size of the space to be scented.

No longer confined to lingerie stores, ambient scenting became standard practice in casinos in the early 2000s and invaded the hospitality sector soon thereafter. Sheraton Hotels & Resorts employs Welcoming Warmth, a mix of fig, jasmine, and freesia. Westin Hotel & Resorts disperses White Tea, which attempts to provide the indefinable "Zen-retreat" experience. (Despite its abstraction, the line was successful enough to inspire Westin's 2009 line of White Tea candles.) Marriott offers different smells for its airport, suburban, and resort properties. The Mandarin Oriental Miami sprays Meeting Sense in conference rooms in an effort, it claims, to enhance productivity. In the mornings, the scent combines orange blossom and "tangy effervescent zest." In the afternoon, executives work away while sniffing "an infusion of Mediterranean citrus, fruit, and herbs."

Scent branding is becoming just as prevalent in retail. Researchers believe that ambient scenting allows consumers to make a deeper brand connection, and data has led many other non-scent-related companies to join the fray. Recently, Gaurin, 41, helped create a fragrance for Samsung's stores, which has been cited throughout the industry as a

milestone in scent as design. He claims the research, which IFF declined to provide on account of contractual agreements, showed that not only did customers under the subtle influence of his creation spend an average of 20 to 30 percent more time mingling among the electronics, but they also identified the scent—and by extension, the brand—with characteristics such as innovation and excellence.

Although independent research remains scant, the number of companies testing the waters is indicative of a broadening phenomenon. Perfumer Coty's upcoming release of a new Guess fragrance, which will also be used for in-store "spot scenting," is intuitive enough. But Credit Suisse, De Beers, and Sony have all been experimenting with ambient scenting in their retail spaces, too. This month Salisbury (N.C.)-based Bloom grocery stores made history by erecting the first-ever scented billboard, which sprays a charbroiled smell over a highway via a giant fan.

Not surprisingly, many businesses are skeptical about the benefits of investing in a signature scent, while others prefer their olfactory experiments remain a secret. Still, Big Fragrance, which includes companies such as Firmenich, Givaudan, Symrise, and, in particular, IFF, predicts an enlarging market if it can gather enough research to make a definitive case that scents evoke specific emotional responses that prepare consumers to spend. And while there has been a lot of intra-industry discussion about engineered olfaction's potential benefits to various products—scented cell phones are a hot topic, as is improving the airline experience—fragrance companies have been given few opportunities to put their talents to the test. (Visa's collaboration with IFF on a forthcoming scented credit card is a notable exception.)

That may be about to change, as evidence of the powerful relationship between the olfactory bulb and the brain's limbic system, the part that handles memories and emotion, appears increasingly compelling. In 2007, in collaboration with IFF and the nonprofit Cosmetic Executive Women, the Raymond Poincaré Hospital in Garches, France, experimented with scent on patients suffering serious trauma resulting in the loss of memory and, in some cases, speech. One patient, who lost the ability to speak after a motorcycle accident, uttered his first words after being presented with the smell of tar. (After nine months of not being able to talk, his first word was "tar.") Another patient, who had emerged from a 12-month coma, was moved to words after the staff exposed him to the smell of a certain bread that had left an imprint from his childhood.

Advances in scent harvesting and dispersal technology, or the ability to deconstruct scent compounds and recreate them, means perfumers can now produce virtually any scent. As documented in Martin Lindstrom's book *Brand Sense*, a Rolls-Royce investigation into customer complaints that the luxury cars had lost their feeling of excellence fingered scent as the culprit. The automaker responded with "a chemical blueprint" for the smell of the 1965 Silver Cloud. "In total, 800 separate elements were found," Lindstrom writes, including fuel, underseal, and felt. The smell is now applied beneath the seats of each car as it comes off the line. As of 2003, Cadillac began processing scent into the leather of its seats. They called it Nuance.

Starting this fall, you can even get a master's degree in scent design. In April, Parsons New School for Design in New York hosted a conference to honor the launch of an interdisciplinary master's program that includes olfaction. As part of a "Scent as Design" seminar, organizers enlisted luminaries from various fields to collaborate with fragrance experts. Among the first explorations is furniture: a butcher block that suggests the meaty whiff of being inside a butcher shop. Another is the South Bronx housing project imbued with the scent of happiness.

While the residents of Sister Thomas appear to be guinea pigs for an emerging industry, Carter sees ambient scenting as a "no-brainer," a practical tool to be used in the national effort to re-green America's inner cities. Jovanovic may have said it best while spritzing L'Eau Vert du Bronx du Sur in a communal bathroom: "It's impact on behavior on a social level!"